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HOUSE DEMOCRATS, WHCOA DELEGATES CALL ON CONGRESS TO EXTEND DRUG BENEFIT ENROLLMENT DEADLINE BEFORE HOLIDAYS

SERVICE PROVIDERS, SENIORS AIR CONCERNS ABOUT MEDICARE DRUG PLANS

WASHINGTON - U.S. Representatives Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Pete Stark (D-CA), Marion Berry (D-AR), Tom Allen (D-ME), and Stephanie Herseth (D-SD), House sponsors of Medicare legislation, today joined delegates from the White House Conference on Aging for a roundtable discussion on the confusing new Medicare drug benefit. As the enrollment process continues, and with coverage set to begin January 1st, America's 42 million Medicare beneficiaries are sorting through dozens of plans to find the one that best meets their needs. The Representatives and delegates called on Congress to extend the Medicare drug benefit enrollment deadline before adjourning for the holidays.

Representative Schakowsky said, "Instead of getting together to enjoy the holidays, too many seniors and their families are getting together to pore over dozens of private insurance policies. Medicare beneficiaries are afraid that they will face significant and permanent financial penalties if they don't choose a drug plan soon. They are being bombarded by aggressive marketers and are afraid that they will make the wrong decision or be victimized by fraud. Before Congress goes home for the holidays, we must give seniors and people with disabilities peace of mind by extending the enrollment deadline and replacing this nightmarish maze with a simpler, more affordable benefit."

Representative Stark added, "There is one thing we all agree on - as President Bush stated yesterday, seniors are confused. Congress must work to provide senior citizens and people with disabilities the time and opportunity to make the best choice about their prescription drug coverage. Our government should not penalize seniors for being confused."

Because President Bush did not attend the White House Conference on Aging, and the Bush Administration has not addressed the mounting concerns with the new Medicare drug benefit, WHCoA delegates took their advice directly to Congress. WHCoA delegates, both service providers and seniors, raised concerns about how the Medicare drug plans are being implemented. Beneficiaries have been inundated by marketers pushing private drug plans. There have not been enough independent counselors available to help guide seniors through

the benefit - and those that are available are also having trouble dealing with so many options.

All participating House Democrats have co-sponsored the Medicare Informed Choice Act (H.R. 3861), introduced by Representatives Stark and Schakowsky, which would give beneficiaries a full year to choose a plan. WHCoA delegates agreed seniors and people with disabilities need more time to choose a drug plan.

"I am pleased to join my colleagues today to urge Congress not to recess until we relieve our seniors and disabled of the anxiety this flawed program has created," Representative Allen said. "The insurers hold all the cards. We must at least extend the enrollment period, penalty free, for all Medicare beneficiaries through the end of 2006 and ensure them the right to select a new plan if their first choice does not work for them. Failure to do so will be another victory for the insurance companies and another broken promise to America's seniors."

Representative Herseth said, "Decisions about one's health and wellbeing are among the most important decisions a person can make. Certainly, these decisions should not be rushed or forced to be made with incomplete or confusing information. It makes sense to extend the enrollment period for Part D and to give seniors and people with disabilities ample time to make an informed choice about their Medicare drug plan."

House Democrats said that extending the deadline will provide a short-term fix to help beneficiaries. They emphasized that the current Medicare drug plan is not the best or only option. The representatives signaled their support for a universal and affordable drug benefit that is administered within Medicare, which would require that Medicare negotiate cheaper prices with drug companies like the VA does. Representatives Berry and Schakowsky introduced H.R. 752, the Medicare Prescription Drug Savings and Choice Act, to provide a better benefit that will be accessible to all seniors and people with disabilities.

"We are letting the drug companies rob us blind by going forward with a benefit that has almost doubled in cost and does nothing to lower prescription drug prices," stated Representative Berry. "It's time to allow Medicare to compete with private plans. The best way to drive prices down is to give seniors the option of enrolling in a Medicare administered drug benefit where seniors come before drug and insurance company profits."